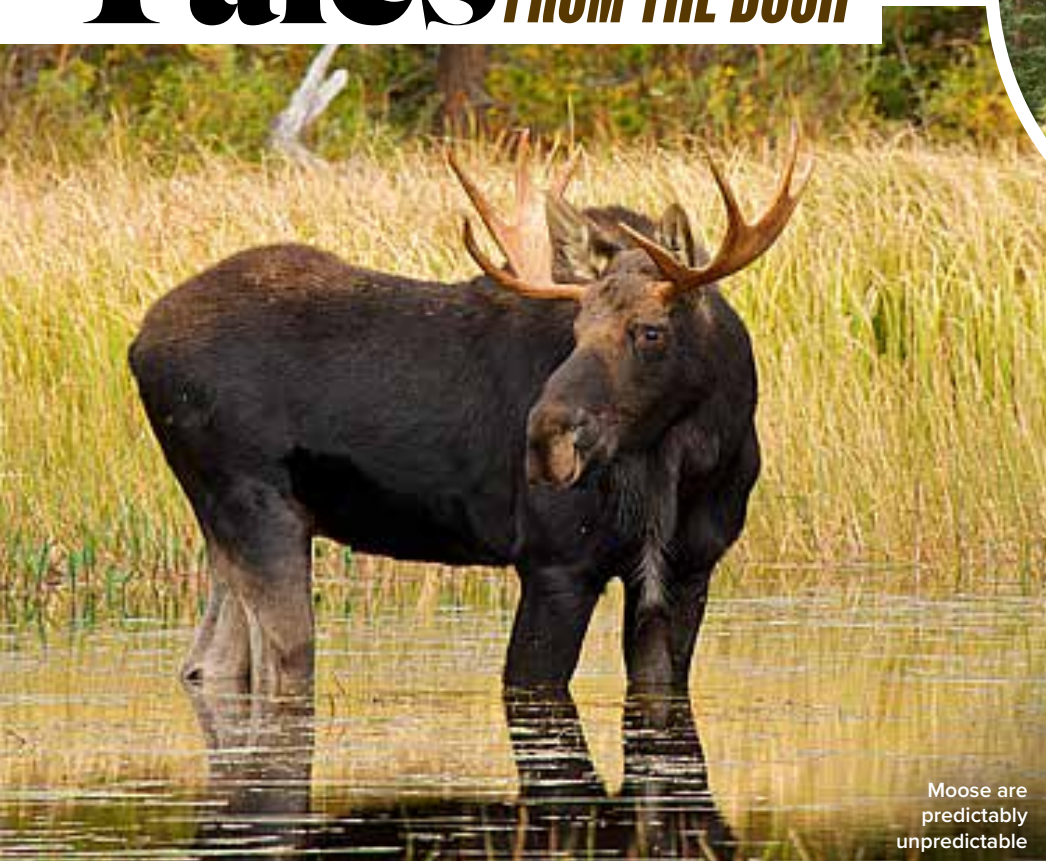


Tales *FROM THE BUSH*



The trail at a quieter moment



Moose are predictably unpredictable

“The hooves pounded up the trail behind us”

Moose in Colorado

BY TIM WENGER

“OUR PUPPY, RUSSELL, HEARD HIM before we did. Within seconds of the dog’s startled yelp, we caught the sound of hooves pounding up the trail behind us. A rainstorm had just broken, and when I turned, I saw a bull moose at least two metres tall charging straight towards my wife, Alisha, and me.

We were hiking the West Bench Trail on Colorado’s Grand Mesa, a route we often visit for walks and bike rides. The mesa itself forms a dividing line between the red slickrock of Utah’s high desert and the high country of the Colorado Rockies. Above 2,500m, the desert falls away into rolling forest, punctured by fractured granite and serrated ridgelines, all under a rich blue sky.

The 1,300km² expanse supports a range of wildlife, from elk and mule deer to black

bears and, as we were witnessing, moose. Of all the animals I’d expected to meet that day, a charging bull was not high on the list.

Moose can reach speeds of more than 50kmph – and when you’re standing in an open meadow, that figure feels suspiciously modest. I flung a clumsy arm around Alisha and we dived into the bushes beside the trail, narrowly avoiding a collision as the bull thundered past at full tilt.

In that instant, every scrap of wisdom I had absorbed from a lifetime of trail guides and *Outside* magazine vanished. I was operating on instinct – not necessarily good instinct, but the best I could muster. The patch of lodgepole pines we’d landed in seemed a decent barrier, offering the illusion of a shield, and we crouched behind a trunk.

“Moose have poor vision and charge when in doubt,” Alisha whispered, cupping

Russell’s muzzle. “Particularly when what they perceive as a threat looks smaller.”

The moose retreated to the far side of the meadow and began grazing on aspen, as though nearly bowling over two hikers and a terrier was simply his warm-up routine.

As it turned out, our manoeuvre had been at least partially sound. We’d got out of the way and given the moose space. Now, in the middle of that awkward, adrenalised pause, I found myself studying him. He was magnificent: his antlers spread wide from his heavy head, rising nearly 20cm in each direction, a clear symbol of power that I was very happy to admire from a distance.

We remained low behind the tree, and I peered around the trunk to check the bull’s position. I knew we needed to wait until he wandered further out into the meadow, and that dragging an anxious dog down the trail in a blind dash was, by some margin, the worst possible option.

So, wait we did, the rain drumming on my cap and on Alisha’s hood. Ten minutes passed, then 20. My mind drifted back to the advice my dad gave me when I was deciding where to go to university. I’d told him I wanted to stay close to home.

“If you stay here, you’ll end up with the same people you grew up with,” he’d said. “You won’t make new friends, and you’ll find it harder to work out what you want.”

He was right. Had I stayed, I wouldn’t have met Alisha, nor fallen in love with the mountains of western Colorado. And I certainly wouldn’t have found myself crouched in a clump of pines, watching an animal I’d always wondered about encountering in the wild, grateful that our first meeting had ended with nothing more than frayed nerves and wet socks.

As the bull finally drifted into the meadow, we eased onto the trail, Russell trotting ahead as if he’d personally handled the negotiations. I was left with another piece of advice that had echoed over the years: don’t panic; trust your instincts. Especially when the local residents outweigh you by several hundred kilos. **W**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tim is a journalist and author focused on conservation, outdoor recreation and technology. He’s filed work from four continents.